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ABSTRACT

Educational administrators have the power to determine the nature of decision-making structures and processes within their institutions and the extent to which decisions are implemented. This paper reviews assumptions underlying decision-making structures and processes established by school administrators; examines potential individual motives within the decision arena; and notes constraints within which decision makers operate. It is argued that participation decision-making practices are not a ready-made panacea for remedying educational problems, and that an array of conscious and unconscious motives influence individuals' decision-making processes. The move to local school councils in Australia has also presented a constraint to administrative decision-making. In conclusion, the decisions that school administrators make about decision-making structures and processes should seek to meet the proposition that people use the educational system to accomplish human ends. (Contains 18 references.) (LMI)

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MAL HEWITSON

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DECIDING ABOUT DECISION MAKING

MAL HEWITSON

Introduction

It is clear that educational administrators have the power to determine what decision making structures and processes will be established within their institutions and, therefore, to a large extent determine how effectively decisions are implemented. The purposes of this paper are, first, to review a number of assumptions which may underlie decision making structures and processes put in place by school administrators; second, to recall to mind motives which individual participants may take into any decision arena; and, third, to note constraints within which decision makers must operate. With regard to effective implementation, as Drucker (1974:477) points out, only good intentions exist until carrying out the decision has become someone's work responsibility. That is, it is necessary to specify in particular what action has to be taken and who is to take it. It is to be presumed that designated staff have the capability to do the job. In any case, follow-through by the administrator is an essential element of effective decision making.

The distinction between the structures and processes of decision making is sometimes difficult to draw. In general the former refers to the structural mechanism by which decision making takes place. Thus the making of significant decisions may be structured as the preserve of the senior administrator (e.g. the principal) or of a small group of senior staff; or structural arrangements may be such that participative democratic forms of decision making apply perhaps through a committee structure. In the former case, the administrator may or may not consult with staff members as part of the decision making process. In the latter case, the procedures by means of which participant decision makers actually arrive at final decisions form the decision making process including, for example, the voting rules which are to be followed by decision committee members.

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Assumptions affecting structures and processes.

A useful starting point for a review of assumptions which underlie decision making approaches is the rational model initially developed by Simon (1960) and variously elaborated in subsequent literature. Hitt, Middlemist and Mathis (1979:65), for example, develop the step-by-step progression of a logical, systematic, decision making process, beginning with awareness that a problem exists and then clearly identifying it. At the heart of identification is gathering information necessary for proper diagnosis. The next stages in the progression are the generation of possible alternatives and their systematic evaluation in terms of advantages (benefits) and disadvantages (costs), followed by choice of the best alternative, implementation of the decision and follow-up procedures.

Duignan (1990:336), drawing on work by Bolman and Deal, argues that such a model assumes not only a world that is relatively certain and substantially rational, but also that decisions are in fact made by choosing the best alternative and that people behave conformingly because it is in their self-interests to do so. However, says Duignan, in the real world of decision making, a different set of assumptions is required about the nature of organizational behaviour.

Harling (1989:25) agrees, at least as far as educational organizations are concerned. He believes that the traditional assumptions about the educational leader as one who possesses legal rights, with powers to impose sanctions and rewards, is being upstaged by the developing professionalism of teachers and administrators at all levels of the educational enterprise. In fact, according to Harling, another source of organisational authority has emerged, based on professional norms and skills. Duignan suggests that this development can be accommodated by replacing the exercise of "power over" staff with participative processes aimed at giving staff "power to" exercise their growing professionalism (Duignan 1990:338).

This solution, however, raises the whole question of democratic models of educational decision making. Bush (1986:57) makes the point that agreement on goals is quite central to the ethos of democratic processes, seeing that the search for consensus lies at the heart of all participative processes. But two sources of conflict over educational goals may arise bringing into question any assumptions which may be made in this respect. The first is conflict among staff members themselves - there is no guarantee that staff can

always reach agreement over school purposes and policies. The opposite is often the case. Hence the ideal of democracy may founder on the professional differences about goals and values.

A second source of possible conflict is between internal participative processes and external accountability. As Bush (p. 59) points out, the principal is invariably held responsible for school policies, and hence risks being caught between the conflicting demands of internal participation on the one hand and accountability to the education bureaucracy on the other. Thus, although the expertise possessed by staff is undoubtedly a source of professional authority, Bush points out that this rarely trumps external hierarchical authority, and the ideal of democracy then succumbs to the reality of bureaucratic power (p. 64).

There are also down-to-earth issues which are not to be overlooked. For example, meetings at which important decisions are made need to be held when staff can attend, such as after school. But lengthy meetings when teachers are already tired may well evoke apathy rather than enthusiasm, and consensus may simply be conceded as participants' powers of endurance succumb in the face of determined barrow-pushing (Bush 1986:62).

Again, if individual staff members choose to opt out of the participative process, or if adequate levels of staff participation are not maintained over time, or if volunteers are used on representative committees, there is no guarantee that democratic techniques will result either in better decisions or in improved chances of acceptance of the decision and its effective implementation. These notions all suggest that administrators need to examine carefully the assumptions which are implicit in their decisions about decision making.

At a more macro level, participative decision making practices imply that everybody's opinion is equally valuable. It might be agreed that everybody's opinion should at least be aired, since the collective knowledge of the decision makers is thereby increased. It might also be accepted that opinions expressed during a school staff meeting warrant more or less equal consideration, given individuals' standing as professionals. But when it comes to participation by community members, the whole context of decision making

may change due to local rivalries, socio-economic status differences, power inequalities and so on. In particular, Nash (1985:55), draws attention to the danger of cliques developing allowing a small group with vested interests to control the decision agenda; and Hardy et al. (1988:361) warn that getting one's way often requires one to "cloak self-interest in the mantle of the common good". Clearly, determining which opinions are of most worth (and voting in their favour) is no easy matter in decision arenas such as community-based school councils.

Nor can it be assumed that there is, in fact, a singular common good (Smith 1973:278). People have quite different, even polarized, conceptions of what the common good is and how it is to be attained. Hence the decision process may again be warped by vocal, overbearing individuals or groups promoting particular interests rather than the general welfare.

Like many of the thoughts expressed in this section, the idea is not new; but at a time when there is a constant press for devolution of decision making authority to the school community level, there could be a tendency to accept participative decision structures and processes as if they were unproblematic. By examining the underlying assumptions, school administrators may be able to avoid some disappointing and frustrating experiences.

In sum, the point which Spindler (1979: 152) makes cannot be denied : participation is a process of power sharing. With inexperienced participants, administrators may need to play a facilitative educative role, since to participate effectively, people must have not only the right and will but also the capacity to do so. It cannot be assumed that such capacity automatically comes with decision making involvement.

Conscious and unconscious motives of individuals

This section considers a set of influences which inevitably affect the mental processes of individuals as they confront decision choices. Such influences are operative in the various roles which people may have but the present focus is their work role.

Not that the different roles can be so easily separated from each other. As Ouchi (Owens 1991:170) points out, a person's life is a whole, not two halves comprised of half

machine from nine to five (i.e. the work role) and half human at other times (i.e. non-work roles). Hence Hodgetts (1986:44) is right: "one cannot separate the individual's personal values when he or she is making organisational decisions". In short, the decision choices which people make are influenced by their subjective state of being, and it behoves administrators to recognise this fact as true of themselves and of all other individuals entering a decision arena.

The term "subjective rationality" is used to imply, first, that the choices people make are rational at least as far as they themselves are concerned and, second, that conscious and/or unconscious motives are involved in the personal decision process. For example, human beings have a deep-rooted need to protect their feelings of self-worth, defined by Snygg and Combs (Mouly 1961:22) as the constant, all-pervading life-purpose of every individual. Associated with this drive are innate personality traits and dispositions which necessarily come into play when people's decision preferences are sought. Thus highly anxious, highly authoritarian or highly competitive people and people with high need for power, affiliation or achievement support choices which are necessarily in tune with such deep-rooted characteristics.

Attitudinal idiosyncrasies among individuals also contribute to their subjective state of being. Often passed down to children by parents, religious, racial, political, social-class and gender-related beliefs and prejudices may be modified and/or rejected as children grow to adulthood and construct their own personal value systems. These in turn find expression in a set of beliefs, principles and ideals which influence their decision choices.

Closely associated with attitudes are people's perceptions, the way they view the world. In this respect, selective perception is of central importance when judgements about other people (and their motives) are made. For example, stereotyping can result in unfounded and mainly unfavourable judgements being made about a particular group or individual member thereof. Alternatively, the halo effect can result in the unwarranted endowment of desirable traits on an individual based on an initial favourable impression. Thus, on one hand, an administrator may decide not to entrust greater responsibility to a particular staff member because of prejudicial stereotyping while, on the other, halo effect may result in the promotion of a less deserving candidate.

Projection may also affect an administrator's judgement of another person. The belief that others are similar to oneself in terms of certain qualities and characteristics is another factor in selective perception, and the administrator's belief tends to be selectively reinforced whenever events show the judgement to have been a correct one. There is, in addition , the administrator's assessment of the trustworthiness and loyalty of staff members to be taken into account - whether right or wrong, these assessments influence judgements about other people.

Apart from the legacy bequeathed by one's background and experience, personal liking may intrude on decisions made at work, as may personal interests. For example, preferment may be shown for a staff member holding political or religious views similar to the administrator's or coalitions may be formed by people who are members of the same club.

Finally, the current status of the administrator may be an important element affecting his or her subjective rationality Administrators who are insecure and vulnerable in their position, who do not have tenure, or who feel like round pegs in square holes have these concerns to cope with when faced with decision choices. Thus an administrator may be unwilling to make a somewhat risky decision if he or she is to be held personally accountable for its successful implementation.

Sergiovanni et al (1980:59) believe that the values underlying administrators' beliefs and opinions which form the basis of their actual decisions are brought to light in the metaphors they use to help define their role. There is no room to elaborate on this point here, other than to link the metaphorical analogies of administrators with the assumptions they make about the nature of their role. Thus administrators may see themselves as running a tight ship, or keeping a parental eye on the school family, or being "primus inter pares" among a group of professional colleagues, and so on. The point is that the assumptions which underlie administrative metaphors also explain the decision making structures and processes which are established. For example, the tight ship administrator is likely to make decisions at the top and hand them down, whereas the "primus inter pares" administrator is likely to involve staff in collegial decision processes.

In summary of this section, then, it is evident that an array of conscious and unconscious

motives influence the mental processes of individuals as they make judgements about others, as they provide inputs to the decision making process, as they signal their decision choices and as they make their own decisions in their work role capacity . In addition to the influences affecting subjective rationality, however, administrators are also bounded by external constraints, as intimated in the following section.

Constraints on decision making.

A long-standing tradition in decisions about schooling in Australia is their subordination to lay control, i.e. to control by persons who are not in the teaching profession. The prevailing attitude has been that it is up to the government to provide adequate schooling facilities across the country. Over the last decade or two, however, greater recognition has emerged, first ,of the non-democratic nature of highly centralised, bureaucratic government school systems and, second, of the rights and desires of parents, employers and the community generally to influence significant decisions about schooling more directly than through elected parliamentary representatives.

The establishment of School Councils as one outcome of the devolution of decision making to the local school level continues the tradition of lay persons having considerable sway over schooling. The point is well taken up by Chapman (1990:227) with regard to the principalship:

> In this context the principal is no longer able to see him/herself as the authority figure, supported and at times protected by system-wide and centrally determined rules and regulations. Instead the principal must become a coordinator of a number of people ... who together will determine the direction the school is to follow.

Chapman goes on to point out that, in their expanded decision-making arena, principals must work with a new set of decision makers having different values. As a consequence they are likely to experience all the frustrations associated with resolving conflicting viewpoints in a framework of participative decision making. Thus, in addition to the broad societal constraints imposed by the legal system, social mores, and widespread economic restraints, school administrators must confront the further erosion of their authority by sharing decision power with local school council members.

The composition of the school council is, therefore, very significant. Walker (Chapman 1990:94) argues that all individuals with legitimate interests in decision outcomes should have equal opportunity for being selected as a representative on such councils. Although there is the need to reconcile representativeness, balance, and council size in the interests of efficient and economical functioning, the Queensland Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum (1990:12) believes that representatives on a decision making body should still express and reflect the range of views which exist within the groups they represent. Though eminently fair and reasonable, the approach will not make it any easier to reach final decisions.

In this regard, administrators must beware of allowing the appearance of participating practices to be a substitute for the real thing. Gronn (Chapman 1990:237), for example, reports that some principals dominate school councils through their control of the meeting agenda, their linguistic skills and their monopoly of information about the internal operation of the school. Middleton et al (1986:64) add that lack of access to procedural formalities, lack of a sense of welcome, a closed style of operation, covert or overt prejudice, language differences and so on may all constrain the proper operation of participative decision making. These possibilities call for the exercise of considerable skill on the part of those seeking to make community participation both democratic and effective.

Finally, the organisation itself sets up further constraints on administrators, over and beyond time and cost limitations imposed by budgets. These constraints have to do with the aims and objectives which the organisation seeks to fulfil. For example, the formulation of a mission and statement of goals (should) direct the energies of organisation members. Activities or proposals which run counter to the culture of the organisation need to be vetoed.

It is true that school administrators themselves are largely responsible for communicating what the school stands for at its most fundamental level - its philosophy, values and expectations - and for promulgating the symbols through which its unique culture is transmitted. Nevertheless, once established, cultural norms assume an existence in their own right and put limits on attitudes and behaviours by deeming them to be acceptable or unacceptable. The paradox is that the stronger the culture which administrators

themselves help to inculcate, the more constraining it becomes on administrative decision making. Administrators cannot assume that the future will be like the past.

Summary.

It is clear that an expanded culture of school administration is fast emerging and that decision making is an important part of its fabric. Administrators need to be alert to the fact that participative decision making practices are not a ready-made panacea for remedying the various problems accompanying the changing context of their role. As the paper points out, the assumptions which underlie different decision making approaches need to be laid bare for scrutiny, else administrators may face deep disillusionment with theoretical notions which, they may claim, do not work in practice. Similarly, people come to a decision making situation with an array of conscious and unconscious motives influencing their decision choices. It would be foolhardy to ignore such influences since they affect not only participants in the decision arena but also administrators themselves. The paper notes the part which administrative metaphors play in determining the structures and processes likely to be established for decision making purposes. Finally, a section is included on constraints which are a necessary corollary of the emerging culture of school administration. In particular, the move to local school councils involves what Chapman (1990:226) refers to as a "new conception of the principalship".

In the final analysis, the decisions which school administrators make about decision making structures and processes should aim to meet Harling's (1989:25) proposition that the educational system should not use people for organisational ends but that people should use the educational system to accomplish human ends.

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